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MUSIC OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINALS.

BY

THE REV. G. W. TORRANCE, M.A., Mus.D.

LONDON:
HARRISON AND SONS, ST. MARTIN'S LANE,
Printers in Ordinary to Her Majesty.

1887.

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Monday Eve

Dear Dr Stainer

I am sending you the "notes" on the Music to the Eumenides — also copies of a few little things lately published by Novello. Perhaps "Thou Wilt Keep Him", or "Souls Serene", might make suitable Music Evening Anthems when your Choir is musically exhausted.

music. The songs are marked throughout by sudden,

Music *of the* Australian Aboriginals.

By Rev. G. W. Torrance, M.A., Mus.D.

[*An Appendix to Mr. A. W. Howitt's "Notes on Songs and Songmakers of some Australian Tribes."*]

The following brief description of the music of the Australian aboriginals, with specimens of their songs from an authentic source, is offered as a contribution to Mr. Howitt's paper on "Songs and Song Makers." Being the result of but a single interview with a native bard, the particulars here noted are of necessity imperfect and superficial. Such as they are, however, it is hoped that they may prove of some little historic value, and lead to further inquiry into a subject which cannot fail to be one of interest to the anthropological student.

Generally speaking, the rude attempts at melody exhibited by these untaught natives may be described as a kind of nasal monotone, or chaunt, usually preceded by a downward progression somewhat resembling the "intonation" in Gregorian music. The songs are marked throughout by sudden, frequent

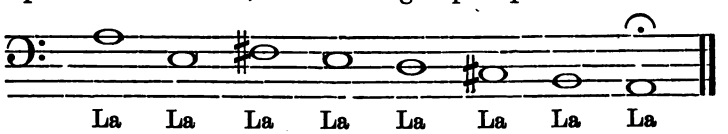
and ever varying inflections of voice, in compass rarely exceeding the distance of a third, and minor intervals predominating.

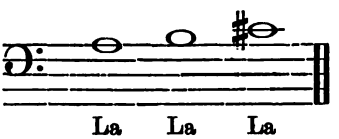
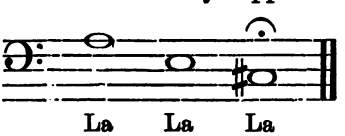
Much of the character of the music depends upon the rhythm which, while very strongly marked, is also most irregular, changing suddenly, and alternating frequently between duple and triple; the changes, moreover, being sometimes introduced by a slackening of the time, and a curious sliding of one sound into another, not unlike the slow tuning of a violin string.

In the "Corroboree" the rhythmic measures are emphasized by clapping of hands and stamping of feet. When one singer or set of singers is exhausted, others in turn take up and continue the chaunt *ad lib.*, till the wild dance is concluded.

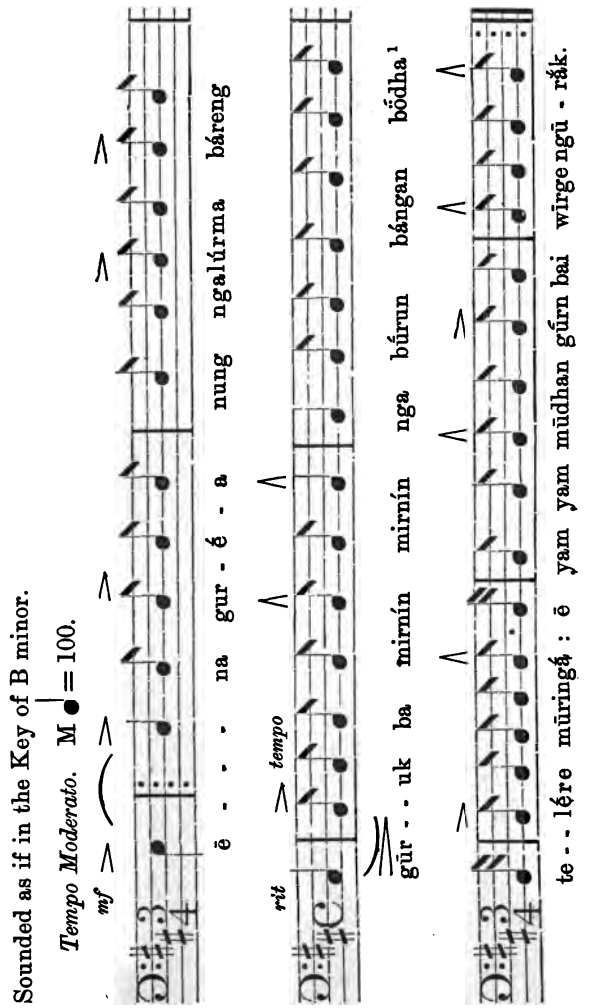
The native bard alluded to above (William Berak, from whom the illustrations were obtained), is an intelligent representative of his race. His voice is a baritone of average compass and not unpleasing quality. His ear also is fairly quick and accurate, though occasionally he would pause long as if trying to recall the test sounds before repeating them; and his patience, good temper, and evident pleasure at seeing his songs committed to paper, were very remarkable.

In order to ascertain the compass of this aboriginal's voice, and his power of retaining and expressing some distinct musical idea, a simple solfeggio passage was sung to him. After a brief silence, and without attempting to repeat the given sounds, he began slowly and deliberately, and with much emphasis on each note, the following impromptu:—



As an ear test, he then repeated accurately, pausing first as before:—

an effort which the bard voluntarily supplemented by:—

evidently much pleased with his own performance, and the applause of his auditors.

The appended native songs, jotted down as nearly as possible in modern notation, will help to illustrate the foregoing observations. The bard was in each case allowed to choose his own starting note, and generally pitched on, or about, D in the bass.

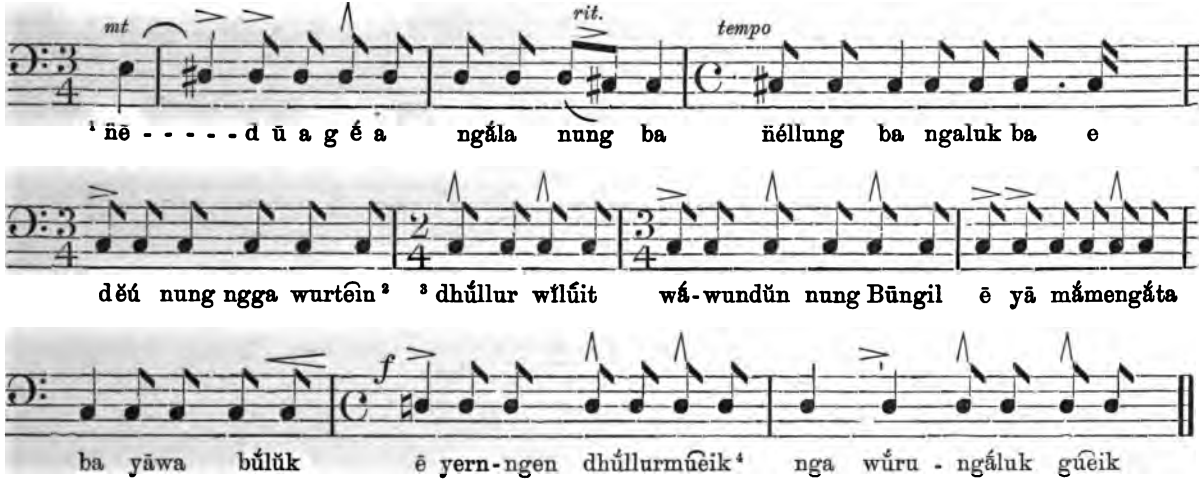

Kurburu's Song.
Sounded as if in the Key of B minor.
Tempo Moderato. M ♩ = 100.
mf
ē - - - na gur - é - a nung ngalúrma báreng
rit
tempo
gūr - - uk ba mirnín mirnín nga búrun bángan bŏdha[1]
te - - lę́re mūringą́ : ē yam yam mūdhan gŭrn bai wirge ngū - rą́k.
[1] German ŏ; dh = sound of "th" in "this."

The above was repeated several times, without break or pause, omitting the "intonation" at each repetition, and ending abruptly at the double bar.

WENBERI'S SONG.

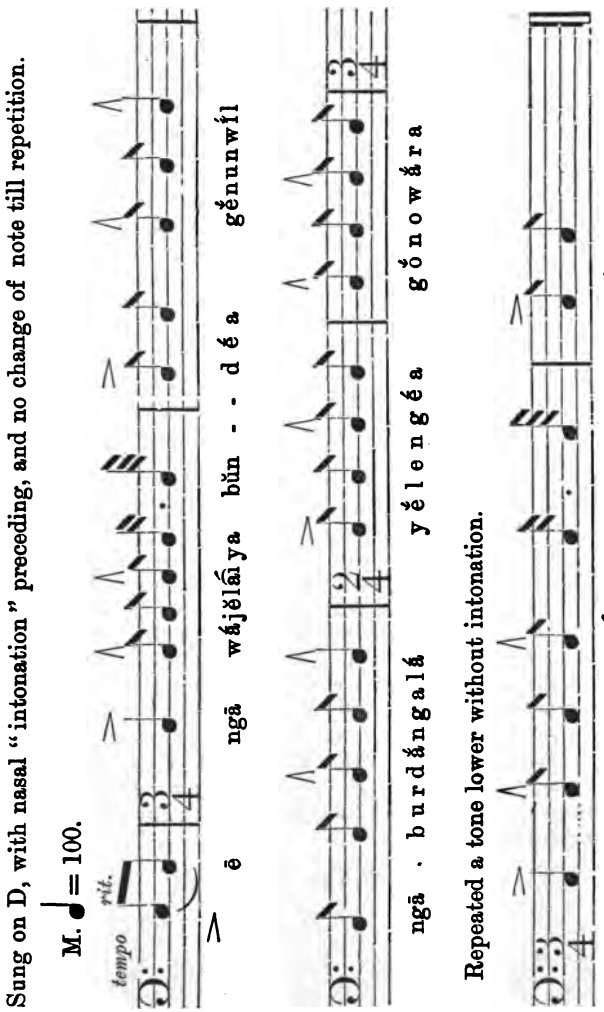
No particular key suggested. Pitched first on D♯ then changed abruptly to C♯, D♮, and B.

Tempo Moderato. M. ♩ = 100.


mt
rit.
tempo
[1] ñē - - - - - d ū a g é a ngắla nung ba ñéllung ba ngaluk ba e
dĕ́ú nung ngga wurtə̂in [2] [3] dhŭ́llur wĭlŭ́it wắ-wundŭn nung Būngil ē yā mắmengắta
f
ba yāwa bŭ́lŭk ē yern-ngen dhŭ́llurmŭ̂eik [4] nga wŭ́ru - ngắluk gŭ̂eik

[1] ñ = ny. [2] The "t" in "wurtĕin" apparently inserted or omitted at pleasure (N.B.—ei="ai" in "rain.") [3] dh = sound of "th" in "this." [4] Mueik = mweik. So also *gueik*.

This song was repeated on B, a third lower, and sung through to the same sound.


Coreboree Song.
Sung on D, with nasal "intonation" preceding, and no change of note till repetition.
M. ♩ = 100.
tempo
rit.
ē ngā wájělái ya bŭn - - dé a génunwíl
ngā . burdángalá yélengéa gónowára
Repeated a tone lower without intonation.
ngā wágelāi ya bŭn - - dé a, &c.

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This drone or chaunt is repeated *ad lib.* as long as the ceremony lasts, a tone lower each time, and accompanied throughout with clapping of hands and stamping of feet.

Discussion.

Mr. Bloxam said that it would be observed that each of these melodies was restricted within the limits of a tetrachord, resembling in this respect some of the ancient Egyptian melodies still existing in Ethiopia; he ventured to give two or three

examples of these melodies in which, although the range was so limited, there was a considerable amount of swing and vigour; much more, indeed, than was to be found in the Australian songs, which consisted, as Dr. Torrance had pointed out, almost entirely of a nasal monotone. It was interesting to observe the intonation at the commencement of each song; which, together with the limited extent o fnotes, may be observed in the Temple melodies of some of the most ancient civilised nations, and conduces to the expression of solemnity and grandeur, as well as mystery. The plain song of the Church, which was originally confined within a pentachord, is characterised by the intonation, and is still, in the tones used for the psalms, simply accentuated recitative of a somewhat similar character to the Australian songs; it is, moreover, of very great antiquity, and most likely inherited from the Temple worship of the Hebrews, who may themselves have derived it from the ancient Egyptians. It is probable that the earliest musical efforts of savages are directed to the imitation of natural sounds such as the warbling of birds, and the rippling of a brook, and some of the ancient Ethiopian melodies to which he had just called attention fully bore out this view. Mr. Bloxam also gave an example of the tune of a Chinese hymn in praise of the dead, which does not go beyond the five tones of the old Chinese scale; these sacred hymns have been transmitted unaltered from time immemorial, and the Chinese trace the commencement of the decadence of their musical system to the time when their five-toned scale was enlarged to seven tones. It is worthy of remark also that these Australian songs were accompanied by clapping of hands and stamping of feet, a custom still practised by the natives of Morocco and Tunis, especially by the Jewish maidens, and which is so often represented on the oldest Egyptian monuments. This method of marking the rhythmical measure of songs is very widespread, being used not only by the people already mentioned but also, amongst others, by the Nautch girls of India and by the Zulus of South Africa

Mr. BERTIN also joined in the discussion.

[*Reprinted from the Journal of the Anthropological Institute, February*, 1887.]

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